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ABSTRACT

Personal observations concerning the teaching of Pushkin at the university level focus on the disparity between modern poetry and classical Russian poetry. Urging lyrical authenticity in oral presentation, the author decries the inadequate standards of English of his students which deny Pushkin full justice in the reading. (RL)

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A Note on Teaching Pushkin

One of the students' main handicaps in savoring verse is, of course, insufficient fluency and a poor nose for stress. This makes it hard for them to gather and appreciate the metric identity of a line, and the many subtle changes from one to the other, which set the character of a stanza or section of verse as much as does the overt cognitive element of the total "meaning". One would think--I always do, though I should know better--that the relative metric rigor of Pushkinian verse would take most of the sting out of the stress problem. But this cannot be taken for granted. Not just the subtler subvalues of unstressed syllables (trailing the stress or leading up to it) are in jeopardy, but the whole identity, the "versehood" of a line. And if you don't read Pushkin's lyrics, especially, as verse, you are not reading them at all--you put yourself, gratuitously, in a situation like Flaubert's who plaintively exclaimed "Mais il est plat, votre Pouchkine!" This must be avoided at any cost.

It is all-important, then, that the students (even, one hopes, the ones who "take" him as a requirement, and the ones majoring in Dialectics of Revolution, The Existential Plight of the Writer, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Portnoy, or some mind-fermenting Soul-Mash of a special major) should come to be receptive to Pushkin's poetry as poetry; not as statements which have been rather cleverly, needlessly, and confusingly cut into lines of roughly equal length with curiously interlocking rhymes. This

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means reciting and re-reciting each piece in Russian, both before and after the verbiage, i.e. the ostensible surface statement of the piece, is understood. It means having, and showing, personal engagement, sensitiveness, enthusiasm, yes, even rapture, vostorg, in voice and expression, using dynamic changes in volume, in mimetics, in tempo--you may sould like a nut to many of them, even to yourself, but if they respect you, they will at least prick up their ears and begin to give Pushkin and poetry the benefit of the doubt. You may quite possible be purveying to many their first oral experience of poetry. Not one in a class of 15 may be confidently assumed to have heard a serious, sensitive recital of rhymed verse in particular, as distinct from modern poets reading their own works, where the poetic idiom may be very demanding, but the rhythms and syntax are close to those of non-poetic speech. You hear a great deal of the wonderful inevitability and natural ease of Pushkinian diction, and many examples may be found; but in large part this is a fond and pardonable fiction, in that the fine rhetorical effects of syntax tensed like a bow and artfully modulated word order are aesthetically endorsed as "natural" because they seem artistically inevitable once received, and could not be replaced by anything more "natural" without a sense of loss.

What else is involved in trying to generate receptiveness to Pushkin's poetry as poetry, besides securing the cognitive meaning and melting the metaphoric ear-wax by recital? It means fairly close analysis, every now and then, especially at the purple

or rosy passages, of meter, stress pattern, and their interaction with morphology, i.e. shape and length of words. This is an analysis of the sort used by Nabokov and others, examining how the actual incidence of word stress vis-a-vis the availability of stress slots in a line affects the rhythmic character of the line, and--this they neglect--how this effect is modified further quite significantly by word length and distribution, via the effect of the various phonemes of juncture and onset. Byla prelestnyj ugolok; vs. Tam drug nevinnyx naslaždenij vs. Gospodskij dom uedinennyj -- all have the same stress-use pattern, but are rendered very different aesthetically by their disparate morphology. Then one may occasionally try to determine respective peaks of cognitive and of prosodic impact (i.e. where in a poem the semantics, and where the poetics, are most exciting) and see whether the one does not in fact influence, even constitute, the other, to one's feeling: in other words, one may discover the secret of rhetoric. This sort of testing of course involves some more slow-paced and properly rhythmic reading aloud. It is then that the full composite impact of the piece may make its mark for the first time. The great trick is, if you can bring it off, not to have bored some to distraction on the way.

To the proximate choice of poetic works evident from the syllabus, one should, I think, add a small sample at least of Pushkin's prose; preferably part of Pikovaja Dama, (or the whole, if the term is long enough); also a letter or two, for the relaxed,

racy, often juicily salacious epistolary style. The Queen of Spades will show the virtues of prose-writing, that is the art of being economical, goal-conscious, yet suggestive and associatively rich. It will demonstrate also an interesting structure--which shows all its bones without being predictable. It will convey a notion of the essential similarity of the criteria of prose rhetoric and poetic rhetoric (cf. the much-demonstrated inner rhetoric of the Onegin stanza). A paragraph of The Queen of Spades can be treated as a prose stanza, with an internal rhetoric compounded, somewhat as in verse, of semantic-grammatical and rhythmic elements. What makes The Queen of Spades more than a long satirical anecdote at the expense of outdated mores, dubious morals, and the delusions of human greed? In part, the structuring of content and the play of semantic-syntactic instinct in rhetoric.

The Tales of Belkin, I fear, are too subtle or too simple to exemplify Pushkin's prose successfully. I often think they are too subtle for me by far. Richard Gregg's terrific Kinbotean article on their symbolic adumbration of all of Frye's archetypal four modes of literature (the tragic, the comic, the ironic, the romantic) has left me so limp and depleted with admiration that I don't think I'll dare read them again.

How much on Pushkin's biography? As seen on my little syllabus, I usually divide it up into five or six chief periods and have students report on it in teams of one-to-three. This is preceded by a couple of introductory lectures on 18th c. Russian literature,

the state of the literary language, and some sample-reading of Lomonosov, Derzhavin, and Zhukovsky. Still I am never happy with the results. The literary state-of-the-union ca. 1820, the role of the cultural clubs and circles, the part played by Pushkin's literary friends and rivals, do not come to life, though the political atmosphere does. There is also apt to be in these reports a lot of grisly (though entertaining) psychologizing of fraternity-lounge caliber on the "praablems" of Pushkin and Natalia Goncharova, cast in a bastard lingo that could reduce even Sophocles, Homer, and Dante to mush. A short quote from Anthony Burgess, who is going through the same thing at City University of New York, will illustrate what I mean:

"Ophelia's going crazy, and what makes her flip is her Dad was wiped out." "Lady Mackbet says she had a kid not in so many words but she says she remembers what it was like when a kid sucked her tit so I reckon she was a mother some time and the kid must have died but we dont hear no more about it which is really careless of Shakesper because the real reason why Mcbeth and his wife are kind of restless and ambitious is because they did not have a baby that lived and perhaps this is all they realy want and S. says notin about it."

Yet to see Pushkin in the context of his time, and to develop some feeling for the fifteen years that preceded, and launched, "the remarkable decade", remains very important; and being lectured to about it would seem to be less effective than having to dig for

it and be responsible for presenting one's findings in rational form, and defending one's emphases and omissions. The lamentable thing here is that ca. 80% of the students have a veritable phobia, rooted in them since grade school perhaps, of literate English. Most of them understand it, and tolerate it in their reading, but would not be caught dead using much of it in their own speech. Never having been pulled up for sloppiness, india-rubber-jargon, and syntactic diarrhoea in school, they now feel foolish and pretentious when they have to talk book-talk before their peers--i.e. speak seriously in exposition and analysis without a thousand sort-ofs, you-knows, likes, and I feels, and without cheap appeals to a protective idol with a hyphenated name, sensa-yuma, or recourse to propitiatory sniggers for having used a $5 word... But this last has nothing especially to do with a Pushkin course.

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